

MARCH IN THE GARDEN 2024

March is the beginning of the rose season in our area, as we focus on spring pruning. Pruning our roses is nothing more than our way of helping Mother Nature with the process of growing stronger and healthier bushes. Generally speaking, pruning in our area should be performed sometime during the first three weeks or so of March. However, Mother Nature can sometimes throw a wrench into our gardening plans, so keep an eye on the forecast and avoid pruning if extremely cold weather (i.e. low twenties or so), is forecasted.

Before we do any pruning, it is a good idea to make sure your equipment is sharp and in good working order. We highly recommend that you use by-pass type pruners on roses. By-pass pruners are the type where the cutting blade by-passes the fixed blade making a good clean cut. Another good idea is to sterilize your pruners. We find that a capful of Lysol concentrate added to 8 ounces of water in a spray bottle makes a very good disinfectant and cleaner. We carry our spray bottle into the garden and spray and wipe our pruners after we finish pruning each bush. This will also help to keep your pruners clean and sharp.

Pruning roses is really not that difficult. All we really want to do is remove dead and diseased canes, shape the bush to promote healthy growth with good air circulation, and help the bush get off to a good start in the coming growing season. Let's quickly take a look at some of the basics. First, you should carefully pull any winter protection that you may have applied back away from the bud union so that you can evaluate the bush. Start pruning by removing any dead or diseased canes. Next remove all those spindly canes that are not capable of producing any real significant growth. It's now time to make some decisions about what you want from your roses. If you want large blooms on strong canes, you will have to prune lower. However, if you're after more blooms that perhaps are a little smaller, then you can prune higher. We like our hybrid teas and grandifloras to produce large blooms on strong stems, therefore we prune them lower, which is generally somewhere between 18 and 24 inches. With floribundas, we're looking for the mass bloom effect and therefore we prune them higher, which is generally somewhere between 18 and 30 inches. If you're pruning climbers or old garden roses, remove only the dead and diseased canes mentioned above, as they bloom best on year old wood. Any major pruning of climbers and old garden roses should generally not be done until after the initial bloom in mid May. Miniatures can be treated just like hybrid teas and pruned to between 6 and 18 inches. Regardless of the type of rose, you should try to remove all crossing canes that can rub each other and provide a breeding ground for insects and disease. A well pruned rose will somewhat resemble a vase with the middle opened up to promote air circulation. Also, if your bush has gotten rather leggy with little or no new growth from the bottom part of the bush, you should strongly consider removing some canes all the way back to the bud union. This will encourage your bush to send out new basal breaks and keep the bush vibrant. Make each cut at about a 45-degree angle about 1/8th to 1/4 of an inch above an outward-facing eye. The eye should be at the topmost part of the slant. This slant will enable moisture to run off and away from the eye.

After you have completed your pruning, it's time to clean up around your beds. Make sure you remove any discarded debris. Next, it is a very good idea to spray lime-sulfur for the last time. Lime-sulfur will kill any leftover disease spores or insects.

Once the soil warms up some, you can also apply your favorite fertilizer. We generally don't recommend that you apply any organic fertilizer until April. Finally, if you have not already done so, we highly recommend that you do a soil test to determine the pH in your garden. Roses like a pH close to 6.2.

We always welcome visitors to our monthly meetings. Our March meeting is Sunday afternoon, March 17th at the Trinity Lutheran Church in Hixson. You can find more information about that elsewhere on this site. Hope to see you soon at one of our meetings!